at US$ 108.80 billion, as against exports estimated at US $74.97 billion during April-January, 2005-06

(c) The value of import of gold to India was US$ 10.3 billion during 2004-05 as compared with US$6.5 billion in 2003-04. The value of exports of gems and jewellery was 13.7 billion in 2004-05 as compared with US$10.6 billion during 2003-04.

Recommendations made by NMCC

884. SHRI VIJAY J. DARDA: Will the Minister of COMMERCE AND INDUSTRY be pleased to state:

(a) whether it is a fact that the National Manufacturing Competitiveness Council (NMCC) has recently made certain recommendations about how to achieve 12 per cent growth in the manufacturing sector;

(b) if so, the details thereof;

(c) whether the Government have examined the recommendations and chalked out any action plan in this regard; and

(d) if so, the details thereof?

THE MINISTER OF STATE IN THE MINISTRY OF COMMERCE AND INDUSTRY (SHRI ASHWANI KUMAR): (a) to (d) The National Manufacturing Competitiveness Council has finalised its report on devising a strategy for manufacturing. The recommendations *inter-alia* aim at stepping up the rate of growth of manufacturing to 12% per annum. The. report has not yet been adopted by the Government.

FTAs with neighbours

885. SHRI RAVULA CHANDRA SEKAR REDDY: Will the Minister of COMMERCE & INDUSTRY be pleased to state:

(a) whether Government have decided to launch a major exercise to hasten Free Trade Agreements with its neighbours;

(b) if so, the details of the talks held with each country;

(c) the outcome thereof;

(d) whether Government have set any time frame to finalize FTAS with all neighbouring countries;

(e) if so, the details thereof;

(f) whether Government are willing to import more from neighbours, especially the less developed economies; and

(g) if so, the details thereof?

THE MINISTER OF STATE IN THE MINISTRY OF COMMERCE AND INDUSTRY (SHRI JAIRAM RAMESH): (a) to (g) India have so far signed Free Trade Agreements with Bhutan namely India-Bhutan Agreement on Trade and Commerce and with Sri Lanka, namely India-Sri Lanka Free Trade Agreement (ISLFTA). At present there is no proposal for a bilateral Free Trade Agreement with any neighbouring country.

The outstanding issues pertaining to the Agreement on South Asian Free Trade Area (SAFTA), which was signed during the 12th SAARC Summit held at Islamabad in January, 2004 and scheduled to come into force from 1st January, 2006, have been completed and the phased Tariff Liberalization Programme under Rule 7 of SAFTA is now scheduled to come into force from 1st July, 2006. India, Bangladesh, Bhutan, Maldives, Nepal, Pakistan and Sri Lanka are members of SAFTA.

Implementation of SAFTA from 1.7.2006 which also prescribes certain concessions to the Least Developed Contracting States (LDCs) (Bangladesh, Bhutan, Maldives and Nepal) is expected to boost intra-SAARC trade significantly including imports from LDC members of SAFTA to India.

A Framework Agreement on the Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation Free Trade Area (BIMSTEC FTA) was signed on 8th February, 2004 in Thailand. India, Bangladesh, Bhutan, Myanmar, Nepal, Sri Lanka and Thailand are its member. Currently the negotiations are continuing with the objectives of starting the implementation of FTA with effect from 1 st July, 2006 as prescribed under the Framework Agreement.